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Ghosts and Marvels.



Aleister Crowley.

Houses which have the sinister reputation of being haunted possess a curious fascination for many persons, even though such persons would indignantly deny that they had any belief whatsoever in ghostly apparitions. Glamis Castle, the traditional scene of Duncan's murder by Macbeth, the haunted house in Berkeley Square, the famous mill at Willington on the Tyne, Epworth Parsonage, where early in the eighteenth century, the Wesley family were half-perturbed half-amused by certain apparently supernatural manifestations, Brook House, on the south-east coast of England, the scene of extraordinary and inexplicable disturbances in the seventies of last century, are but five of hardly numerable instances which could be given wherein mysterious happenings are said to have taken place at some time or another, and may—for all one knows to the contrary—still periodically occur.

Mr. Elliott O'Donnell is one of many authors who have written entertainingly on such matters. His book, "Rooms of Mystery"—albeit a work that anyone who is troubled with nervous fears should hesitate to read, especially just before going to bed—contains various cases of an allegedly supernatural kind which are more or less well known. For example, he retells the strange story of Sir Richard Baker ("Bloody Baker") of Cranbrook, in Kent, who is supposed by some persons to be the prototype of Bluebeard, of terrifying nursery lore, and whose

sanguinary exploits probably provided the Rev. Richard Barham with the material for one of his "Ingoldsby Legends." At the same time, it would appear on excellent authority that a good many purely imaginary crimes were fathered upon Sir Richard by maliciously disposed persons, for we read that he, "far from being a black sheep, was a most respectable parsonage. He twice officiated as High Sheriff of Kent. It was just possible that when acting in that capacity he did something to incur the animosity of the village people, who unable to wreak vengeance on him in any other way, affixed the epithet 'Bloody' to his name." Sir Richard was honoured by Queen Elizabeth (his was one of the many country houses at which the Virgin Queen is reputed to have spent a night) and in view of these facts the tradition that describes him as a wholesale murderer of women is not easy to understand. Mr. O'Donnell adds: "One can only surmise again that his character was thus maligned and rendered odious in the eyes of posterity by people whom he had offended in his official capacity, and who acted thus out of spite."

The author describes mystery rooms in cottages, schools, manor-houses, and in the residences of ordinary peace-loving, ghost-abhorring citizens, who seem to have suffered from supernatural visitants much as other people have been afflicted in their dwellings with plagues of mice or bugs, or cockroaches. Then there are inns or ill-repute, torture chambers, priest holes, rooms with dark, suspicious-looking stains on the floor which will not wash out, scrub as one may, and even cellars of mystery, like the one in Leinster-terrace, Bayswater, the scene of a murder in 1926, where Mr. O'Donnell spent a solitary night-vigil some three years later, and saw weird sights and heard uncanny sounds attributable to any natural cause.

In one of his chapters, the author relates his experiences at a séance conducted by Mr. Aleister Crowley at a studio in Chelsea—a piece of theatrical buffoonery, performed with appropriate gestures and incantations, and having some sort of vague reference to Satanism and the Black Art, concerning which Mr. O'Donnell dryly observes:—"I have heard many accounts of the weird things that are alleged to occur at the ceremonies and services presided over by Mr. Aleister Crowley in Sicily, but if they are no more mystical and harrowing than those I and my friends witnessed in Chelsea, they are meat only for the most elementary type of thrill-hunter, the very rawest tyro in magic and occultism. We were looking for something more subtle and magical than the magic we had frequently seen at Chinese and

Indian entertainments, but we certainly looked for it in vain in the much-talked-of mystery room of Mr. Aleister Crowley."

Among the most gruesome of the author's stories is that of an old house (since demolished) near Brighton, in Sussex, and of how, many years ago, an old piratical sea captain (retired) was carried off bodily by an enormous phantom crab, "covered all over with seaweed, that used to enter the premises at night, crawl upstairs, and wander through all the rooms, as if in search of someone. It smelt horribly, and there was something so venomous and satanic in its appearance that those who saw it sometimes died of fright." The only thing is, the whole story reads rather like the nightmare of some indiscreet person who had supped too liberally off the crustacean that subsequently haunted his uneasy slumbers. Possible haunted ghostly apparitions may be attributed to a somewhat similar case.